MY RELIGION

MADAME CHIANG KAI-SHEK

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By Madame Chiang Kai-shek

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Madame Chiang, wife of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, China's loved leader, has earned the title of the First Lady of China, and perhaps even the First Lady of the World, by her unstinted devotion to her country and her people in an effort to make life in all its phases richer and more productive. She was graduated from Wellesley College, Massachusetts, Class of 1917. She is the youngest of the three famous sisters of T. V. Soong, the former Finance Minister of the Republic of China. By her husband's side, Madame Chiang has worked untiringly and fearlessly to help China, particularly through the New Life Movement, which has become a vital force in the spiritual, economic and cultural life of the people of China.

BY NATURE I am not a religious person. At least not in the common acceptance of that term. I am not by nature a mystic. I am practical-minded. Mundane things have meant much to me, perhaps too much. Mundane, not material, things. I care more for a beautiful celadon vase than for costly jewels. I am more disturbed as I traverse the crowded, dirty streets of an interior city than I am by the hazards of flying with poor visibility, which my husband and I experienced the other day. Personal danger means nothing to me. But I am concerned that my schools for the children of the revolutionary heroes shall raise for them, and perhaps for the communities to which they return, the standard of living and the quality of life.

Also, I am more or less skeptical. I used to think Faith, Belief, Immortality were more or less imaginary. I believed in the world seen, not the world unseen. I could not accept things just because they had always been accepted. In other words, a religion good enough for my fathers did not necessarily appeal to me. I do not yet believe in predigested religion in palatable, sugar-coated doses.

I knew my mother lived very close to God. I recognized something great in her. And I believe that my childhood training influenced me greatly even though I was more or less rebellious at the time. It must often have grieved my beloved mother that I found family prayers tiresome and frequently found myself conveniently thirsty at the moment, so that I had to slip out of the room. Like my brothers and sisters, I always had to go to church

and I hated the long sermons. But today I feel that this church-going habit established something, a kind of stability, for which I am grateful to my parents.

My mother was not a sentimental parent. In many ways she was a Spartan. But one of my strongest childhood impressions is of Mother going to a room she kept for the purpose on the third floor to pray. She spent hours in prayer, often beginning before dawn. When we asked her advice about anything, she would say, "I must ask God first." And we could not hurry her. Asking God was not a matter of spending five minutes to ask him to bless her child and grant the request. It meant waiting upon God until she felt his leading. And I must say that whenever Mother prayed and trusted God for her decision, the undertaking invariably turned out well.

Perhaps this is why I sometimes think that I have grown spiritually because Mother was taken from me. Or to be perfectly honest, I sometimes think perhaps God took Mother from her children in order that we might grow. As long as Mother lived I had a feeling that whatever I did, or failed to do, Mother would pray me through. Though she insisted that she was not our intercessor, that we must pray ourselves, yet I know for a certainty that many of her long hours of prayer were spent interceding for us. Perhaps it is because religion in my mind is associated with such a mother that I have never been able to turn away from it entirely.

Before I leave the subject of prayer, I want to tell you of a lesson I learned from my mother. It was shortly before she left us. She was ill and already confined to her bed. Japan had begun to show her hand in Manchuria. Most of this we kept from Mother. One day I was talking with her about the imminent Japanese menace, and I suddenly cried out in irresistible intensity of feeling:

"Mother, you're so powerful in prayer. Why don't you pray that God will annihilate Japan—by an earthquake or something?"

She turned her face away for a time. Then looking gravely at me she said: "When you pray, or expect me to pray, don't insult God's intelligence by asking him to do something which would be unworthy even of you, a mortal!"

That made a deep impression on me. And today I can pray for the Japanese people, knowing that there must be many who, like Kagawa, suffer because of what their country is doing to China.

During the last seven years I have suffered much. I have gone

through deep waters because of the chaotic conditions in China: the lopping off of our richest provinces, the death of my saintly mother, flood, famine, and the intrigues of those who should have been helping to unify the country. All these things have made me see my own inadequacy. More than that, all human insufficiency. To try to do anything for the country seemed like trying to put out a great conflagration with a cup of water. In contemplating history I began to feel the futility of life. Sometimes I would say to myself (never to my husband): "What if we do achieve a strong, unified country? In the sum total of things what does it amount to? As surely as a country rises to the zenith, so surely does it decline!"

During these years of my married life, I have gone through three phases as related to my religion. First, there was a tremendous enthusiasm and patriotism—a passionate desire to do something for my country. Here was my opportunity. With my husband, I would work ceaselessly to make China strong. I had the best of intentions. But something was lacking. There was no staying power. I was depending on self.

Then came the second phase. These things that I have referred to happened, and I was plunged into dark despair. A terrible depression settled on me—spiritual despair, bleakness, desolation. At the time of my mother's death, the blackness was greatest. A foreign foe was on our soil in the north. A discontented political faction in the south. Famine in the northwest. Floods threatening the millions who dwell in the Yangtze Valley. And my beloved mother taken from me. What was left?

And then I realized that spiritually I was failing my husband. My mother's influence on the General had been tremendous. His own mother was a devout Buddhist. It was my mother's influence and personal example that led him to become a Christian. Too honest to promise to be one just to win her consent to our marriage, he had promised my mother that he would study Christianity and read the Bible. And I suddenly realized that he was sticking to his promise, even after she was gone, but losing spiritually because there were so many things he did not understand. In common parlance, I have to "hand it to him" for sticking to his daily Old Testament reading when without illumination there was little help in it for him.

I began to see that what I was doing to help, for the sake of the country, was only a substitute for what he needed. I was letting him head toward a mirage when I knew of the oasis. Life

was all confusion. I had been in the depths of despair. Out of that, and the feeling of human inadequacy, I was driven back to my mother's God. I knew there was a power greater than myself. I knew God was there. But Mother was no longer there to do my interceding for me. It seemed to be up to me to help the General spiritually, and in helping him I grew spiritually myself.

Thus I entered into the third period, where I wanted to do, not my will, but God's. Life is really simple, and yet how confused we make it. In old Chinese art, there is just one outstanding object, perhaps a flower, on a scroll. Everything else in the picture is subordinated to that one beautiful thing. An integrated life is like that. What is that one flower? As I see it now, it is the will of God. But to know his will, and do it, calls for absolute sincerity, absolute honesty with one's self, and it means using one's mind to the best of one's ability. There is no weapon with which to fight sincerity and honesty. Political life is full of falsity and diplomacy and expediency. My firm conviction is that one's greatest weapon is not more deceptive falsity, more subtle diplomacy, greater expediency; but the simple, unassailable weapons of sincerity and truth.

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I used to pray that God would do this or that. Now I pray only that God will make his will known to me. God speaks to me in prayer. Prayer is not self-hypnotism. It is more than meditation. The Buddhist priests spend days in meditating. In meditation the source of strength is one's self. But when one prays he goes to a source of strength greater than his own. I wait to feel His leading and His guidance means certainty.

In the feudal time of the Three Kingdoms, there was an old general called Ts'ao Ts'ao. Once upon a time he was going on a long march. His soldiers were weary, thirsty, discouraged. He said to them, "From my horse I can see a beautiful garden, full of luscious plums!" Their mouths watered, new strength and courage came to them. But for how long? The plum garden did not materialize, and the soldiers were more weary than before. That to me is like meditation. There is a buoyancy of spirit for a time. It may help when there is no oasis in sight. But when I am spiritually thirsty, I do not think of plum gardens—I go to the fountain of living water. . . . Prayer is our source of guidance and balance. God is able to enlighten the understanding. I am often bewildered, because my mind is only finite. I question and doubt my own judgments. Then I seek guidance, and when I am sure,

I go ahead, leaving the results with Him.

Our finite minds beside His infinite mind seem to me like this: I go walking, and the hills loom above me, range upon range, one against the other. I cannot tell where one begins, and another leaves off. But from the air (I seldom have time to travel any other way now) everything has a distinct contour and form. I can see things so much more clearly. Perhaps that is like my mind and God's. And when I talk with him, he lifts me up where I can see clearly.

I do not think it is possible to make this understandable to one who has not tried it. To explain to one who has had no experience of getting guidance what it means would be like trying to make a stone-deaf person understand the beauty of a Chopin sonata. A physicist or a specialist in tones and their wave lengths might convey some idea of it to such an one. I do not know. But I'm sure I could not.

What I do want to make clear is that whether we get guidance or not, it's there. It's like tuning in on the radio. There's music in the air, whether we tune it or not. By learning to tune in, one can understand. How is it done? As Brother Lawrence told us long ago, "by practicing the presence of God." By daily communion with him. One cannot expect to be conscious of God's presence when one has only a bowing acquaintance with him.

In conclusion, with me religion is a very simple thing. It means to try with all my heart and soul and strength *and mind* to do the will of God. I feel that God has given me a work to do for China. In this province of Kiangsi thousands of *li* of fertile rice fields are now devastated ruins; hundreds of thousands of families have been rendered homeless. . . . Rural rehabilitation must follow, helping the farmers back to their land and to better conditions of life. This is no small task. In fact, China's problems in some ways are greater today than ever before. But despondency and despair are not mine today. I look to Him who is able to do all things, even more than we ask or think. At this time of writing, I am with my husband in the heart of the bandit area. Constantly exposed to dangers, I am unafraid. I know that nothing can happen either to the General or to me till our work is done. After that, what does it matter?

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